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KENNEDY FIGHTS FOR FAMILIES FACING HEALTH CARE CRISIS

(As Prepared for Delivery)

In these hard economic times, Americans are anxious about the future. Balancing the demands of work and family is getting more and more difficult every day.

Times are especially hard for families facing a health care crisis. It's difficult enough to deal with a serious illness in your family without the added worry that taking time off from work puts your job at risk.

When my son lost his leg to cancer years ago, he had months of difficult treatment before he became cancer-free. I was fortunate enough to be able to take the time I needed to be there for him.

All Americans deserve this kind of support when they're facing a health care crisis. They need to know that serious illness will not put their job and their family's future in jeopardy.

We took a major step forward in the 1990's when we passed the Family and Medical Leave Act. Since then, more than 60 million families have been able to recover from illness and care for a new child or a sick relative without putting their job at risk.

Last week, though, the Bush Administration announced new regulations that undermine the vital protections in the Family Medical Leave Act. It will be harder for workers to take medical leave when they need it, and more difficult for people to return to work when their health crisis ends.

When so many families are struggling, this is the worst possible time to roll back the protections of the Family and Medical Leave Act. Instead, we should be strengthening the Act.

Under current law, the leave is unpaid, which is a real problem for millions of low-wage workers. They can't take the leave, even for a serious illnesses, because they'll miss a paycheck if they do. We need to provide paid FMLA leave for working families so that everyone has the support they need to weather a crisis.

A second key reform is to grant workers paid sick days, so they can treat a minor illness and be back at work the next day.

In our economic crisis, families need more security, not less. I hope my colleagues in the Senate will join together to pass these reforms to help hardworking men and women deal with these basic challenges of modern life in the workplace.

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